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ABSTRACT

To be effective, college learning assistance centers (LACs) must reflect the mission and goals of the institution and be coordinated with existing programs and services. Based on the literature, however, LACs engage in the following 14 major functions: (1) academic evaluation and diagnostic testing; (2) instruction in study skills and learning strategies; (3) peer tutoring and/or professional tutoring; (4) supplemental instruction (SI), or course-related, systematic, and highly structured group tutoring; (5) computer assisted instruction and access to other educational technology; (6) providing credit and non-credit developmental courses; (7) providing faculty services, such as research opportunities, assistance in developing SI programs, cooperative learning demonstrations, and classroom support materials; (8) publicizing LAC programs through newsletters and class and faculty visits; (9) keeping college administrators informed about LAC programs and services; (10) providing staff training and development activities; (11) referral services to other programs and services on campus; (12) maintaining close relations with offices that provide personal, financial, educational, and career counseling and providing training for peer counselors; (13) integrating with advising departments and faculty advisors; and (14) providing program evaluation, including planning, involving students and staff, developing a database, and designing follow-ups. Contains 11 references. (BCY)

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What Are the Functions of a College Learning Assistance Center?

Martha Maxwell

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WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF A COLLEGE LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTER?

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1/16/97

College learning assistance centers (LACs) provide a variety of academic support services to students, faculty and staff and, to be most effective, the LAC Director must coordinate her programs and work closely with academic departments and other campus services. The learning center's programs must reflect the mission and goals of its institution and also be adaptable to changing curricular and student needs. For example, in recent years learning centers are offering more Supplemental Instruction and/or Videoed Supplemental Instruction classes for students in high risk course (i.e. courses in which a large number of students earn D's or F's or W's). New developments in distance education, on-line computer programs, and other technology, also are emerging as viable functions for LACs.

In starting a learning center, it is vital that you determine what functions are already being offered on your campus and who offers them. For example, you may want to set up a tutoring program and work toward gaining accreditation from the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) but find there is a well-established writing center in the English department . Should you hire writing tutors? This is a decision you must make in consultation with the writing center director - some writing centers are staffed with professional and graduate student tutors but have heavy demands and a limited budged and may welcome the chance to participate in training undergraduate writing tutors or to sponsor a tutoring for credit course. Other directors would consider it an invasion of their turf and fight you-- no matter what personnel resources or sources of funding you have .

Another example is that if the counseling center or health service offers help for those who suffer from text anxiety and/or math anxiety etc., you should refer students to them rather than duplicate their efforts.

As budgets tighten and services are downsized, administrators are merging services such as integrating reading, writing, and math labs or learning centers and writing centers. It is better in this kind of environment to be proactive and make your own contingency plans. Negotiating, establishing and maintaining good relations with other departments are essential to a successful learning center, for if different units behave like warring fiefdoms and refuse to cooperate, students suffer. Some examples are when advisers won't refer students to learning center services or where counselors tell students their instructors in basic skills are demanding too much work from them. These situations lead to bad feelings that can undermine your program's effectiveness.

The following outline, which is based on a review of the literature, suggests the main categories of functions that today's learning centers serve (Burns, 1991;Godsey, 1992;Maxwell, 1978, 1997; Spann & Thompson, 1984;White, 1997). Large institutions usually have separate departments for each of these functions while smaller colleges may include most or even all of them under a learning center umbrella. In establishing a learning center, it is wise to concentrate on a few key functions initially , based on a campus needs assessment and expand to other functions as circumstances permit. One approach is to perfect a model program in one of your functions - for example, tutor training and certification - and then help other academic departments to build and similar programs for it is doubtful that you could get the space and personnel it would take to run campus wide tutoring programs in all subjects.

The Burns' Learning Assistance Process Model (below) illustrates the learning assistance center's interrelationship with students and institutional characteristics and also with the functions of other student services.

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Here are the fourteen major functions that LACs perform:

SERVICES TO STUDENTS

1. Academic evaluation/diagnostic testing.

In her survey of experts in the learning assistance field, Godsy, (1992)reported that they agreed that diagnosis and prescription for learning difficulties was the most important learning center function. In addition to administering diagnostic and placement tests for individual students, learning centers also perform broader testing functions, especially centers in smaller colleges where resources are limited. They can assist faculty by administering :

- course exams for LD or other disabled students who need special testing conditions (i.e., extra time, quiet, etc.)
- all standardized tests
- course make-up tests for faculty

(For example, Oakland Community College's Learning Center testing section provides student assessment and placement for the entire campus and administers all tests except those given directly in classes).

2. Programs to Improve Study Skills and Learning Strategies.

LACs offer study skills help by providing training for students in improving learning strategies through individual counseling, workshops and courses. Study skills workshops are short, informal programs stressing topics like exam skill , time management skills, avoiding exam panic, stress management -

Marie-Elaine Burns (1991) *A Study to Formulate a Learning Assistance Model for the California Community College*, Dissertation, Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, p. 184.

Figure 1. The Learning Assistance Program Model

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e.g., math , writing, science, testing anxiety etc.) or LACs may offer required or voluntary semester long course. For example, the learning center at the University of Illinois-Chicago gives courses for which students receive institutional credit on such topics as "Reading in the Disciplines." (Casazza and Silverman, 1996).

Also the LAC can:

- promote and package study strategies and information to prevent failure and distribute these to students. There may include printed information, handouts, booklets and other materials as well as radio or TV programs, audiovisual aids, study-tip phone hot-lines, computerized programs, web sites, and books.

- offer graduate and professional exam review

- offer certification/credentialing exam reviews

- participate in new student academic orientation/ courses

- develop and disseminate new methods for improving skills such as:

  establishing collaborative/ cooperative learning groups

  setting up self-contained study groups and training others to do so (e.g., resident assistants in the dormitories or teaching assistants in mainstream courses, etc.)

Whom do you serve?

If you have specifically targeted groups like students on probation, disadvantaged or underprepared students, athletes, etc. then special provisions should be made to give them special priority for services. On the other hand if 50 percent of the freshmen in your university are supported by state grants that

specify that students must maintain a B average to remain in college, then you should expect large number of students seeking help to get and maintain B grades. Offer academic support services and many students reflecting all levels of preparation will come.

- **Other groups who often need or request academic support programs:**

  --returning adults

  --probationary students (Rochester Institute of Technology and Slippery Rock State University have exemplary programs for students on probation.)

  --disadvantaged minority students (i.e., those sponsored by TRIO or special state or private funding, etc.)

  --first generation college students.

  --summer bridge programs for underprepared entering students

  --international students

  --ESL students

  --students with learning disabilities or physical handicaps or other special needs.

Other services for students:

--participate in Freshman Year Experience courses.

--offer study skills services in other locations- e.g., dormitory, student union, etc.

(See also developmental courses below)

3. Peer Tutoring and/or Professional Tutoring Services

Tutoring services represent an important component of most learning centers who offer:

- regularly scheduled tutoring appointments, drop-in tutoring, on-line tutoring. (individual or group tutoring services).

- tutor selection, training, supervision, evaluation:, Supervising tutoring for credit courses.

- certification services for tutor training and staff development (CRLA)

4. **Supplemental Instruction** -(SI)(sometimes called adjunct skills) - is a course related, systematic, highly structured form of group tutoring in which a student is trained to be the SI leader, attends all classes in the targeted course and meets with groups of students to demonstrate and model successful study strategies.

To implement SI classes, the LAC must:

- arrange with faculty member of targeted mainstream course to offer SI classes, selects and trains SI leaders supervises and evaluates SI and/ or VSI (video supplementary instruction). Although most SI programs are voluntary and offer no credit there are exceptions such as the California State university at Long Beach where the Learning Assistance Center offers 20-30 SI classes in different subjects each term and students earn one academic credit for attending a SI course.

5. Computer Assisted Instruction and Other Educational Technology

Learning center computer labs offer interactive computerized software for basic skills courses (reading, writing, mathematics), study skills, critical thinking, et al. and programs for individual practice (such as speed reading). Currently many centers offer on-line services for students including grammar, vocabulary,

spelling as needed or through courses, on-line tutoring, and distance education. These services may include:

- computer services for LD.. students or visually and auditory handicapped; ESL students and those learning a foreign language.

- math lab., writing lab., and reading labs as well as computer help in other subjects. In fact, there are so many different computer services for students on large campuses these days that it is probably better that they be decentralized as long as there is adequate computer back-up support technical service available at each location.

- computer assisted instruction, and audio visual equipment (projectors, to CDroms)-- audio-visual service - self-help material and course work

(Sometimes students can use LAC computers for their own papers -and use laser printers. This can create problems unless a fee is charged.)

Note- Occasionally, a LAC inherits a service that has little to do with its mission - for example, one learning center was given a large space for a computer lab. with the provision that part of the space continue to be allocated to a rarely used sign language lab . (This is a situation where experience in horse trading might benefit the LAC director).

6. Developmental courses - for credit or non credit

Many colleges require entering students to pass placement tests or be held for developmental/remedial courses in reading, writing or mathematics. Services that are limited to special groups are usually viewed negatively by student and faculty alike and tend to discourage those students who need help the most from seeking help. To avoid being stigmatize as a dumping ground for weak students, learning centers offer programs for all students ranging

from the precollege summer programs to those for seniors preparing to take graduate or professional school exams .

Decades of experience and research show that stand alone remedial courses are not cost-effective and represent a very poor and limited way to deliver academic services (Maxwell, 1978; Keimig, 1983). That they also have negative effects on students' attitudes and expectations has been reflected in high drop-out rates; the fact they force students to take longer to finish degrees, lower their self-concepts, and make it more difficult for them to shed the image of being at risk students (Dimon, 1993). Those are reasons colleges are increasingly realizing the advantage of including developmental courses under the LAC.

One thing is clear that faced with classes of high risk students, the developmental skills instructor cannot do it alone. Her/his students need access to all of the LACs programs thus the classes and services must be integrated and easily accessed. .

Also there should be alternatives to required developmental courses for students with special needs - these include self-help programs, CAI, audiovisual training - all of the things that are part of the LAC tool chest.

But it is best if students attending a required program have been advised and counseled and volunteers. This assumes that they have other options -like taking CAI courses or using other self-help materials to raise their skill deficiencies. As the Burns' model shows, the LAC can support developmental/remedial courses - and -can provide an array of programs ranging from those for someone who needs some review to those who need more intensive structured programs.

7. Faculty Services

LACs provide outreach services to faculty in key departments. They may:

- offer to give announcement and/or present demonstrations to students of the skills needed to succeed in their class. Encourage faculty to let tutors make announcements about tutoring services.

- engage in research with faculty on teaching and learning at the college level

- invite faculty to speak at staff development workshops, tutor training sessions and also reciprocate by offering to address their departmental staff meetings.

- work with faculty members to develop and improve SI & VSI classes.

- demonstrate how to teach with collaborative /cooperative learning groups,

- LAC's may also service as learning resources centers for faculty - offering support materials , audio visual aids, etc. for courses in the disciplines or work with faculty to improve their understanding of special groups - like learning disabled.

- Work with faculty on designing and implementing research on student success, student learning characteristics, development of new teaching strategies and curriculum development. .

- Encourage faculty to serve on the LAC's faculty advisory committee.

- Hopefully, faculty contacts can aid learning center administrator and staff to serve on and give input to faculty committees that make policies affecting students such as retention, orientation, basic skills, freshmen seminars, academic probation review and appeals, assessment/placement, academic standards, curriculum design, faculty development, etc. (White, 1997).

8. Publicity and Public Relations

Publicizing your programs are another essential component of LACs. . You must let the faculty, administration, and student body know what you offer through:

- ongoing Information services - this means posting information about the program, through your own or other's newsletters, person to person contacts, etc.

- distributing center book marks paper lunch mats, taking out ads in newspaper, discussing services in classes, orientation, etc. The most recent way to set up a web page on Internet describing your services.

- visiting faculty individually, speaking at department meeting, etc..

- Informing faculty about the needs and characteristics of students through reports and studies.:

- participating in on going faculty development programs about effective ways of teaching today's diverse students. Exchanging ideas with faculty about teaching and tutoring procedures.

Special services :

- offer help in textbook selection (i.e., the readability of texts being considered), developing study skills materials in the course, and getting help from appropriate faculty members in selecting computer software and audio-visual programs for student use on the LAC.

For example, helping faculty incorporate study skills into their classes and textbooks. The West Point Learning

Center teaches how to study mathematics during the first few weeks in the beginning math courses.
Rutgers' Gateway Program where study skills for underprepared students are integrated throughout beginning mainstream courses such as psychology.

9. Informing College Administrators About Your Program

Obviously LAC Directors should regularly inform their administrators about their programs, but others should be informed as well - including deans, academic department heads, directors of students services, etc.

Other administrators that you should not forget to communicate with and inform about your services and your program needs include:

- Director of Grants or Development Officer.
- Institutional Research Director
- Admissions Officer.
- Ombudsperson- this is a valuable person to know when students have problems with faculty members.
- Campus Archivist- Your annual reports, studies and record summaries should be sent regularly to the campus archivist for future scholars who might want to know about what programs have been offered in the 80s and 90s to how many and what kinds of students, who were the staff, etc.

10. Staff Training

Providing inservice training for staff development is another important LAC function. There should be a budget for sending

staff to local, state and national professional meetings, conferences, institutes. and visits to other centers.

Also the center should offer regular in-house staff development activities - invited speakers from campus academic departments and services, learning centers in other colleges, provide a library of current journals and publications in the field, etc. .

The LAC should make efforts to become accredited both for its tutoring program and for its developmental program and have its staff credentialed under the emerging NADE guidelines.

11. Referral Services

LAC professional staff and receptionist and clerical staff should be trained to give students information about other services to which they can be referred when the need arises. Many lac's are developing web pages to guide students to important human and other resources on campus. That will make the task much easier.

12. Counseling

The LAC should maintain strong relationships with the department (s) that offer personal, financial, educational and career counseling. It is particularly important that students begin to plan for their majors at end of freshman year and/or beginning of sophomore. year when they have had experience with different college courses - and need to begin to set more specific educational goals. When this counseling is not available elsewhere on campus, it sometimes falls to the LAC to provide it.

> Note: In programs for underprepared disadvantaged students, it is essential that counseling be an integral part of the academic program and that counselors provide both formal and informal assistance to students and staff. Counseling arrangements which consist of counselors who sit in their offices and wait for clients to schedule does not work with at-risk students who need more intrusive intervention. Thus programs for at-risk students often hire their own counselors.

- Counselor Training

develop, select, training, supervise, and evaluate peer counselors or mentors. (Trainers and supervises of peer-counselors/ mentors may be professionals from the counseling center or the LAC - depending on training and qualifications).

13. Advising

The LAC should be closely integrated with the advising department or faculty advisors for peer advising is an important asset to program with at-risk students or those on academic probation. Sometimes the advisers supervise peer advisement and in other cases learning center personnel manage the program. Peer advising programs involve arranging for selection, training, supervision and evaluation of peer advisors.

Some learning centers offer on-going faculty development programs for academic advisors, publish advisor's newsletters and other materials (i.e., Slippery Rock State University).

14. Evaluation:

Here are some typical activities required in the evaluation function:

- Designing and implementing evaluation plans .
- Involving students and all staff in the evaluation efforts.
- Insuring that recommendations from evaluations are implemented.
- Developing a data base and keeping accurate records including number of students using the service, number of hours spent, demographics of the users,
- Typically, student users answer questionnaires about their attitudes and suggestions for the LAC services they used. It's also a good idea to include questions about your services and how they affected students on campus

wide surveys- such as those sent to graduating seniors or alumni by you campus institutional research office--in other words, by adding a few questions about your program to other people's questionnaires you can gain more information. .

- Designing and implementing follow-up studies on grades, grade point averages and graduation rates are also recommended.

SUMMARY

Based on a review of the literature, this paper outlines 14 major functions of college learning assistance centers:

student services including academic evaluation/diagnostic and other testing;

programs to improve study skills and learning strategies;

tutoring services,

supplemental instruction,

computer assisted instruction and educational technology, and developmental courses.

Faculty services include outreach to faculty in key departments , developing support services, and collaborating with faculty on special projects. Also LAC's have to function in publicizing their program to both faculty administrators and the student body, and provide staff development activities and train their staff to make appropriate referrals. Counseling and advising although integral parts of a successful program for underprepared students may be offered by other agencies but LACs often supervise the training and supervision of peer counselors, peer mentors and peer advisors.

Specific functions will vary with institution and the mission of the learning assistance center. In determining what services your center should offer, you need to know what existing services are available on your on campus and figure how best they can be integrated with your learning services.

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